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Governor gives 'grand' address; NIC celebrates opening for health, science building

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COEUR d'ALENE -- Gov. Dirk Kempthorne took some North Idaho College classrooms by surprise Thursday, popping in to chat with future health-care practitioners before giving the keynote address at the health and sciences building grand opening celebration.

"I told them if they didn't finish they'd have the governor watching," said Kathy Mason, learning lab preceptor, about her students who were in the process of checking dummy patients.

"Hey, she saved a patient," the governor joked before heading down to the next classroom. "I'm inspired when I walk through and see these students -- the sparkle in their eyes."

Because of rain, about 250 people crowded the main floor of the month-old \$11.9 million building, which was named the Meyer Health and Sciences Building at the trustee meeting Wednesday.

"Despite the weather, I'm having a pretty darn good day," said NIC President Michael Burke. "It's hard to express the flat-out joy we're feeling being in this building."

The 51,000 square-foot building increases general classroom space at NIC by 25 percent and adds state-of-the-art facilities to a campus that hasn't had a new lab since 1974. It includes 10 general use classrooms, eight labs, a theater-style auditorium with seating for 100, a smaller 60-seat auditorium and two video broadcast classrooms.

"Do you know how many states would love to have a dedication of this facility? Anyone. Anywhere in the world," Kempthorne said.

The governor praised the state Legislature for having the foresight to take advantage of low interest rates and move forward on a project that could have taken 10 years to complete instead of the two years it took since the Legislature approved its funding in 2003.

Kempthorne said he was told he could jeopardize his political future by pushing for the 1 cent sales tax hike, but that has since been retired and gave the state a "temporary booster rocket" that helped make buildings like the Meyer Health and Sciences Building possible.

"What I'm not going to jeopardize is the future of our students," Kempthorne said. "Rather than waiting for things to improve, we improved them."

He also thanked the building's namesake -- Steve and Judy Meyer, who donated \$1 million to the school for an endowment of a Meyer Technology and Equipment Fund.

The donation is the largest in the school's history and brings the campaign to fill the building with equipment \$1 million over its \$2 million goal.

Dick Sams, campaign co-chairman, said more than 360 donors contributed to the successful campaign.

"The response we got is like the response we got today -- you're here, you said 'yes,'" Sams said. "We are still accepting donations, by the way."